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## A Guide to Working with the Media

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AmeriCorps is not about what's happening in Washington — it's about what's going on nationwide in communities like yours. The Corporation for National Service wants to help you spread the news of your program's challenges and accomplishments — and of the dedicated work of your AmeriCorps Members.

This manual is intended to assist you in working with the media to promote your program and AmeriCorps. The Public Affairs team wants to help you in any way we can. While we don't have the resources to conduct media affairs for the hundreds of programs that make up AmeriCorps, we can offer guidance, support, information, and coordination to help all of us communicate effectively. Please call us with any questions, concerns, or ideas you have.

Also, we would ask that you provide the Office of Public Affairs with news about your program — accomplishments, interesting human interest stories, significant new partnerships, highly effective AmeriCorps Members, etc. This type of information helps the Public Affairs staff let the national media know what AmeriCorps Members are accomplishing. Public Affairs also maintains a news monitoring service, so please send original copies of newspaper articles written about your program, with the paper's masthead and the date of the paper, as soon as they run.

Thank you — we look forward to working together!

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## FOREWORD

Effective use of the media can greatly enhance the impact of your project. Getting your story out through the media can help you:

- recruit AmeriCorps Members and sponsors;
- reach potential funding sources;
- educate the public about your project; and
- highlight Members and activities that are getting things done in your community.

Reaching the news media starts with doing some homework, planning a strategy, and applying some objectivity. When making decisions about media relations, remember this fact of life: You've got a lot of competition. Many organizations will try to get their stories and events covered the same time you are. Understanding the media is the crucial first step to success.

Every time you tell someone about AmeriCorps, you are engaging in public relations. Publicity is simply a means of telling people what you want them to know. For AmeriCorps, you want your audience to know the purpose of the program, who's involved, how it operates, and why it's important to your community. Rather than sharing this information with one person or a small group, the media takes your message to thousands of people instantly.

## INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS NEWS?

You probably know much more about news than you realize. Just think about what draws you to a story when scanning the front page or listening to the evening news. Print and broadcast media outlets generally have three goals — to inform, to advise, and to entertain. The easier you make it for the media to attain these goals, the more likely you are to receive media coverage.

Several characteristics make information newsworthy. Reporters and editors respond best to timely news stories and ideas that include:

- Local interest. You always have a better chance of making the news if your story is based in the community, centered on a local program or individual.
- Widespread appeal — stories that involve a topic currently in the news, or a common human characteristic (courage, triumph over adversity, etc.) shown in a new way.
- Well-known people.
- A local angle to a national story. State and local media like using a “hook” that illustrates the significance of a national story to their audience.

When planning events and activities, always try to consider media opportunities and the most appealing way to present them to reporters. Think about developing a succinct message or “pitch” — a few words that will convince the media of the importance and newsworthiness of your story.

## TYPES OF MEDIA

Each type of media has unique characteristics. It is important to understand the nuances of each outlet when determining which are most appropriate for getting your message out.

### Newspapers

Newspapers provide in-depth coverage of stories and are particularly good for reaching decision-makers (e.g., the mayor, business leaders, community officials) who are interested in more than “headline” news available on television and radio. Newspapers include regular news and features, editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, investigative reports, and opinion columns.

Reporters spend a great deal of time learning about and explaining complex issues. They appreciate all the documentation, facts, and figures you can provide.

*Weekly newspapers* are a major source of information for people outside of metropolitan areas. It is generally easier to place stories in these publications, as they primarily focus on local stories.

*Letters to the Editor* are an excellent way to respond to a newspaper article you don’t agree with. Letters should be short — no more than 400 words. The shorter a letter is, the more likely it is to get printed. Because letters are often edited, you should make your most important point in the first paragraph.

If your letter is in response to a particular article or another letter to the editor, refer to the title, date, and author of the original piece in your opening sentence.

*Op-Ed pieces* are a highly effective way of expressing your opinion in the newspaper. Op-Eds are opinion pieces that appear opposite editorial pages. They should be persuasive, well-thought-out, well-written, relatively short (800 words is ideal), and authored by the head of an organization, a program director, a Member’s parent, or some other high-profile person.

*Editorial Board Meetings* are important if you want to get a newspaper's editorial endorsement for your program. Find out the name of the editor of the editorial page and either call him or her directly or write a convincing letter about why they should see you. You should know before meeting with an editorial board if they've already taken a position on national service — it will impress them, and if they've been non-supportive in the past, you can prepare yourself to counter their charges.

## Magazines

Local and regional magazines offer many of the same advantages as newspapers: large staffs, time, and space to devote to your story and a product that can be reprinted. Stories of interest to magazines include profiles of interesting people, trends, or exceptional performance in some area. Except for stories of widespread, national interest, you probably will want to concentrate your efforts on placing stories in regional, state, or city publications.

Articles in special interest publications, or in trade or professional journals, reach specific, key audiences that can be important to your project. Tailor each story to the specific audience when approaching such publications. And remember that most magazines work with a lead time of several months.

## Wire Services

Wire services, such as the Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters, and PR Newswire gather news from all across the country — and world — and provide stories on a continuous basis for other media. Wire service bureaus are typically located in large cities, but they frequently use “stringers” (local reporters) to cover news in other areas.

Press releases and media advisories should be sent to the nearest wire service bureau and/or their local stringer.

Reuters Daybook and the Associated Press Calendar, published Monday to Friday, carry short accounts of breaking stories and upcoming activities like press conferences, conventions, speeches and hearings. Reporters often use this calendar to determine their story of the day. To get an event listed, submit the information via press release or media advisory at least three or five days in advance — and follow up with a telephone call. Materials should be addressed to the Daybook Editor or Calendar Editor.

## Television

Television provides the greatest media reach. There are several opportunities for airing your message:

- News programs
- Public affairs programs
- Talk shows
- Editorials
- Feature segments
- Public service announcements
- Local cable television shows and public access TV

Watch your local news programs to become familiar with the reporters, their interviewing styles, and the types of stories they care about.

## IDEAS FOR NEWSWORTHY AMERICORPS STORIES

- Invite reporters to cover your swearing-in ceremony — talk about goals.
- Announce specific AmeriCorps accomplishments.
- Report your accomplishments at local town council meetings.
- Develop feature and human interest stories (e.g., articles about particularly dedicated and effective AmeriCorps Members).
- Celebrate and participate in a well-known day or week (e.g., the National Day of Service, Martin Luther King Day).
- Announce and adapt national reports and surveys locally.
- Arrange for a testimonial or guest speaker.
- Initiate a new project.
- Tie your story to the news of the day or to a previous story covered by the media.
- Celebrate an anniversary or milestone.
- Link up with another publicity event in your community.
- Give an award to an AmeriCorps Member or a supportive community leader.
- Announce new private sector partnerships and alliances with other service projects.

### ▼ Promoting AmeriCorps on Television

Remember that television is visual. Invite reporters to a project site so they can see your AmeriCorps Members at work (be sure they're wearing their AmeriCorps uniforms and hats, and have plenty of AmeriCorps signs and banners). Reporters would much rather cover an activity than simply interview a talking head.

### ▼ Promoting AmeriCorps on Community Programs

One way to show your community how AmeriCorps is meeting local needs is to offer an organization spokesperson to participate in talk shows or community affairs programs. Make sure the selected spokesperson is prepared to answer all questions—positive and negative—in a concise, well-thought-out manner. Practicing interviews helps to avoid unwanted answers and mistakes.

Your message for television must be short and simple. Television news usually reduces complex stories to 30- to 60-second segments. Lengthy explanations usually end up as short “sound bites.”

TV news departments — in particular, the assignment editor — decide the day's coverage the day before or on the day itself. Inform the assignment editor and reporters of scheduled events in advance with a media advisory or phone call, and always make follow-up calls, especially the day before your event is to take place. Calls should be placed before 4:00 p.m. to avoid the deadline rush. Try to hold events before 3:00 p.m. whenever possible so that coverage will appear in that day's broadcast.

Whenever a TV program airs a piece on your program, be sure you tape it on your VCR. You'll want a copy to help with future marketing efforts, and outside video services can be very costly. Please send a copy to the Office of Public Affairs immediately after airing — it helps us track story trends and lets us share good ideas with other AmeriCorps programs.

### Radio

In recent years, many radio stations have expanded their news coverage and now are providing more air time for talk shows and call-in programs on issues of interest to the community. However, there are many radio stations that don't carry news at all, so be sure to do your homework when compiling your radio media list.

### Public Affairs Programs

Public affairs programming is usually a combination of news and community services-oriented material. It takes many forms on both radio and television:

- Interviews
- Documentaries
- Panel discussions
- Editorial comments

Program ideas should be current and geared toward the community at large. They include:

- Preparing an editorial on the need for service in your community.
- Asking the station to sponsor a community service segment during local news programming, then providing information and AmeriCorps Members to be interviewed.
- Submitting an editorial response to an opinion made by the station or another community group.

## .....REACHING THE MEDIA

### Developing a Media List

Developing and maintaining a comprehensive, up-to-date press list is critical to gaining press coverage. If you're in a large community or city, you may want to check your library for media directories, such as the *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media* or *Bacon's Publicity Checker*. Your state commission may also be able to provide you with a good press list.

Your list should include:

- Wire services (e.g., Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters)
- Local and regional newspapers (both daily and weekly)

- Regional magazines
- Local television news and talk shows
- Local radio news and talk shows
- Local cable TV stations
- Special interest publications, such as:
  - ethnic publications and radio stations
  - college newspapers and radio stations
  - community newspapers and calendars
  - church bulletins
  - corporate newsletters

For each of these outlets, your list should include the name, title, address, phone number, and fax number of key reporters and editors. The best way to ensure that your list is accurate is to call the outlet to obtain or confirm the names of the reporters and editors who are important to you. If possible, you should update your list every three months, as there is frequent staff turnover at media outlets.

In most cases, the assignment editor decides what is “news” — filtering all the potential news stories each day (advisories, releases, letters, memos, and wire service reports) and deciding which reporters will cover what events.

For each media outlet, when possible, your list should include the names of the following people:

- Assignment editor
- Reporter
- City editor or news director
- Bureau chief
- Daybook or daily calendar editor
- Editorial page editor
- Living/lifestyle or community editor
- Features editor
- Public service director
- Appropriate talk show hosts and producers

## Working with Reporters

As with any working relationship, it's important to establish a rapport with people in the news media. There is no substitute for a good relationship with a reporter. Read their stories. Get to know them and give them background information on your program. Tell them what you're trying to accomplish. See where their interests lie. Follow up with occasional phone calls to give them story ideas or to let them know what's going on with your program. Establishing a personal relationship will make your work much easier when it comes time to pitch stories you really care about.

Remember that reporters are always looking for stories; they need you almost as much as you need them. Reporting the news is a fast-paced, high-pressure job, and reporters have little time to spare. To successfully work with them, keep in mind that they want:

- The facts
- Accurate information
- Quotes — short, colorful comments from a high-profile person in your organization.

## SELECTING AND TRAINING AMERICORPS SPOKESPEOPLE

Part of your media strategy should be to identify and train effective spokespeople for your program. While the work of AmeriCorps programs is a team effort, some people are better communicators than others. For the sake of your AmeriCorps program, it's important to identify in advance the person who is your best communicator and make sure that that person is the one talking to the press. Telling your story in the most effective manner may require an AmeriCorps Member, a staff person, or even a recipient of your services.

The information in this booklet can be useful for your spokesperson(s) and also for other AmeriCorps Members and staff. When covering AmeriCorps, reporters are most interested in visiting projects and talking with the members themselves. Developing questions for spokespeople and members can help them prepare for interviews.

Sample questions might be:

- Why did you become an AmeriCorps Member?
- What is the significance of the work you're doing?
- Would you do this work even if you were not an AmeriCorps Member?
- Why should taxpayers pay for AmeriCorps?
- What have you accomplished as an AmeriCorps Member?



## COMMUNICATING THROUGH INTERVIEWS

Interviews can be an excellent way to get your message out. They are also a means of associating a friendly face with your organization. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Practice before the interview.
- Stick to the points you want to get across.
- Be yourself.
- Always tell the truth.
- Look at the interviewer and try to forget about the camera.
- Keep your answers short.
- Avoid jargon and technical words.
- Smile. Be enthusiastic!

## HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Occasionally, a reporter may confront you with tough questions — questions that might create controversy or ones you can't fully answer. Remember, you never have to provide an immediate answer, and you shouldn't attempt an answer without complete information. Tell the reporter you'll get to him or her with a response as soon as possible — this goes for TV interviews as well. Public Affairs staffers are always available to help you in such situations — just give us a call.

- Background information — basic or historical information that will help the reporter understand the significance of your story.
- An exclusive — being the only reporter to get a story.

### Other tips:

- Be responsive — return reporters' call as soon as possible. Reporters have tight deadlines, and news dies if it is not reported quickly. Know their deadlines.
- Try not to call reporters after 4:00 p.m., as that is the usual time they begin writing their pieces on deadline.
- Be honest — never lie. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Offer to get back to the reporter with the information at a later time. Respond as quickly as possible.
- Be factual and refrain from expressing opinions.
- Offer assistance — for example, suggest other credible sources on a story, such as your state commission.
- Be realistic — you can't control the news. You can't determine whether a story runs, where or when it will be placed, what the headline, content or tone will be.
- Reporters receive many story ideas a day! Make sure your media advisories are as tantalizing as possible.

## Getting Information to the Media

There are many ways to contact the media. Following are some of the most common.

**PRESS RELEASE.** A press release is a full and succinct account of your story (usually one or two pages) and should be written as a news article. (Some small community newspapers publish news releases exactly as they are submitted.) See sample press release on page 15.

**MEDIA ADVISORY.** A media advisory (or press advisory) is a one-page fact sheet that gives the bare essentials. Media advisories are usually written to announce an upcoming event. They should contain a brief description of the event, the time, location, number of participants, and a contact name and phone number. See sample media advisory on page 16.

**PITCH LETTER.** When a story is not breaking news — such as a human interest story — writing a pitch letter is often the most effective way to summarize the most important aspects of your story and why readers, viewers, or listeners will want to know about it. Pitch letters should be no longer than a page and should be written in clear and compelling language.

Written materials should be sent or faxed to all the names on your press list. Although this may mean that three press releases go to the same publication, you are more likely to get coverage when you have the attention of several people at a newspaper or station.

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*All of the above press communications should be followed up with phone calls to the appropriate reporters and editors.*

**PHONE CALLS.** If time is short and you don't have time to put anything in writing, you can call reporters and editors directly to pitch your story. Be sure to get your main point across quickly and in the most compelling fashion. Reporters do not have time to waste.

**PRESS KIT.** A press kit is a set of written materials that provides information a reporter needs to write a story. Press kits are particularly useful at events to which media are invited. If you do supply press kits, make sure you take plenty for everyone who may want one. Among the materials you may choose to include in a press kit are:

- press releases
- fact sheets
- biographical sketches
- copies of your latest newsletter
- photos
- graphic elements, such as your logo
- slides, videotapes, and audiotapes
- press clips
- your business card

**WHEN TO CONTACT THE MEDIA.** Unless there is an important breaking story, try to contact the media well in advance. Begin sending press releases and advisories about two weeks before your event and always follow up with several telephone calls — first to make sure they received your release and then a day or two before your event or announcement to remind them and to confirm their attendance.

Drafting a sound media plan each year will help you ..... **DEVELOPING A MEDIA PLAN**  
fully prepare for media attention. Of course, it must be flexible so you can accommodate unforeseen news. The plan should address three basic questions:

- What are your public relations goals?
- What is the best way to achieve them?
- What is the best timing for reaching your goals?

To develop your plan, define the goal, create a media strategy, and consider the timetable for your plan, both in terms of requirements and limitations. For example, your goal may be to publicize the accomplishments of a particular project. Your strategy identifies who will be interested in the story, which media outlets reach these groups, and how you will sell or “pitch” the story. Next, you should develop a timetable to address factors such as timeliness of the story and media deadlines.

Your media plan also should include strategies for educating elected officials about your program and involving them in your activities. See *Involving Elected Officials* on page 10.

▼  
**“ON THE RECORD” OR  
“OFF THE RECORD”?**

Some reporters may ask you to supply information “off the record” — which means the information will not be printed or broadcast. It is best to assume that *all* information you give to a reporter is “on the record” — which means it can be printed, broadcast, and attributed to you. Be prepared to see anything you say to a reporter show up in a newspaper or on radio or TV news.

## .....PLANNING EFFECTIVE PRESS CONFERENCES

### SEEKING OUTSIDE HELP TO PROMOTE AMERICORPS

Companies and foundations that are AmeriCorps partners have internal staff or outside consultants for their public relations needs. They would probably be delighted to assist you get out press releases, stage press conferences, and plan other events to publicize your program. They may even have their own personal contacts with reporters that would be helpful.

Also, local advertising agencies, print shops, etc. may want to contribute to your program by designing and printing local AmeriCorps materials, brochures, etc.

Public Affairs or Public Liaison can also assist you with media, signs, and materials.

Holding a press conference can be an effective way to get media attention — especially when it is used for particularly newsworthy announcements. A successful press conference requires careful planning and attention to details.

### Content

A press conference should be held only if you have major news to announce. Many organizations go years without holding one, and some will never hold one at all. A press conference may be appropriate if, for example, your organization:

- forms a task force or partnership to meet a significant problem or need;
- launches a new project;
- begins a significant new service;
- has a leading public official — governor, senator, mayor — make a site visit and/or endorse your program goals; or
- releases year-end accomplishments.

### Timing

To notify the media, send a press advisory to every name on your media list three or five days before the event. Follow-up phone calls must be made repeatedly, especially to those reporters you most want to attend. For maximum coverage, schedule the conference in the morning. This will allow reporters time to do follow-up work after the conference ends.

### Logistics

Here are some logistical suggestions to help ensure a successful conference:

- Select a convenient location for the press conference, such as a local project site or a centrally located meeting room. (If the site is outside, have an alternative rain site planned.)
- Choose a site large enough to accommodate the media, guests, cameras and other equipment.
- Reserve the front row for media.
- Prepare press packets.
- Make sure there are plenty of three-pronged electrical outlets for reporters' equipment (lights, recorders, cameras) and a riser in the back of the room for TV cameras.
- Provide a lectern that can hold several microphones or one microphone that feeds sound to a multiple port box that crews can plug into.
- Display the AmeriCorps logo in a prominent spot (especially on the front of the podium or behind the speakers).
- Provide chairs for reporters, name cards for speakers and an easel for visual aids.
- When appropriate, use visual aids such as colorful charts and graphs — with smaller copies in the press packets.
- Provide a media sign-in sheet so that you'll know which reporters attended.
- Start the conference on time; limit it to 30 minutes.
- Introduce the speakers.
- Conduct a question-and-answer session after the statement/conference.
- If appropriate, have a room available for post-conference media interviews.

- Select a person to greet the press, answer their questions, and escort them around the site, if needed.
- Plan a minute-by-minute logistics sheet that includes speaking order, arrival and departure times of special guests, and last-minute items.
- Take plenty of photographs — black and white as well as color. Also, when possible, record the press conference with audio or videotape.

## Press Kits

Press kits should be handed out to reporters attending the press conference and delivered afterwards to those who did not attend. In addition to regular press kit contents, as described earlier, be sure these press kits include copies of the spokesperson's statement, the media advisory announcing the conference, and biographical information and photos of the speakers.

Public service announcements (PSAs) are short messages that radio and television stations air free of charge on behalf of community organizations. These messages must contain information beneficial to the community and must not include controversial or self-serving material.

## COMMUNICATING THROUGH PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Requirements

To find out more about placing PSAs, contact the public service directors at the television and radio stations serving your area. Meet with them personally to find out their PSA requirements (preferred length and format). Be sure to stress why the project is important to your community.

Determine whether the station is willing to help produce PSAs for your organization — many will! Some might prefer that you provide the copy for their announcers to read; some will air a pre-recorded PSA.

### Writing Style

When writing a PSA, remember that broadcast copy is written and designed for the ear. It is personal and has a sense of immediacy. Broadcast copy must be clear, concise, conversational, and correct. Use the active voice and present tense whenever possible. Inform viewers (listeners) that they can contact your organization for additional information — and include your telephone number. Be prepared for increased calls!

Your message should be easy to understand the first time it is heard. One way to test your copy for conversational tone is to read it aloud. Make sure there are no words that are hard to pronounce. Use contractions just as you would if you were talking.

Make sure it contains accurate facts, dates, and names.

### Length

Be sure to fit your message to the time slot.

- 10 seconds — about 25 words
- 30 seconds — about 75 words
- 60 seconds — about 150 words

### ▼ PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR AMERICORPS

If you don't have a copy of the public service announcement on AmeriCorps, contact the Corporation's Office of Public Affairs. You may want to consider developing a PSA on your AmeriCorps program for radio, television, and/or print. The Public Affairs Office can supply camera-ready logos and will work with you to prepare an effective script.

## ..... INVOLVING ELECTED OFFICIALS

Keeping local, state, and federal officials informed about how AmeriCorps is “getting things done” in your community should be one of your marketing priorities. Here are some ways you can familiarize them with the good work your project is doing:

- Make a list of key elected officials in your state. Include the name, address, and phone number of the mayor, local legislators, state officials, governor, U.S. Representatives and Senators. You can get this information by calling their offices in your local area or at your state capitol. You can reach your U.S. Representative at (202) 225-3121 or your U.S. Senators at (202) 224-3121. U.S. Senators and Representatives have offices in both Washington, D.C., and in their districts, so include both on your list.
- Add elected officials to mailing lists when sending out press releases or newsletters.
- Send copies of all positive media materials to elected officials: newspaper clips, magazine articles, and videos of television segments.
- Invite elected officials to attend and speak during special events (e.g., swearing-in ceremonies) or press conferences (funding/awards/accomplishments). If there is a scheduling conflict, ask elected officials to send a member of their staff. If you secure the attendance of an elected official, work with his or her public affairs team to ensure media coverage. Also, ask the elected official to prepare an official proclamation or citation for your project to be presented at the event.
- Invite elected officials to visit your AmeriCorps site and see the results for themselves! Be prepared to show and discuss everything about your site, and introduce them to your AmeriCorps Members. Representatives and Senators return from Washington to their home districts frequently. Call the district offices to determine the schedule of your Representative and your Senators. Choose a date that is far enough in advance to be considerate but not far enough in advance to be ignored — six to eight weeks notice is a good general guideline. When the visit is confirmed, work with his or her staff to invite the media to come along.

Please let the Corporation’s Intergovernmental Affairs Office know when you have a visit planned, and then let us know how the event went.

See sample invitation letter on page 18.



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When communicating with the media about AmeriCorps — whether in a press release, an editorial, a letter to the editor, an interview, or a public service announcement — the following talking points may be helpful to you.

- AmeriCorps is a national service movement that is engaging dedicated Americans of all ages and backgrounds in a domestic Peace Corps to get things done throughout our nation's rural and urban communities.
- AmeriCorps promotes core American values — community, educational opportunity, and responsibility.
- Whether they serve in AmeriCorps\*NCCC, AmeriCorps\*VISTA, or one of the hundreds of other AmeriCorps programs in communities across our country, AmeriCorps Members make a one- or two-year commitment to tackling our communities' toughest problems — in public safety, education, human needs, and the environment.
- In exchange for a full year of results-driven service, AmeriCorps Members earn a living allowance and education award of \$4,725 per year to help pay for college, graduate school, or vocational training.
- AmeriCorps is a partnership among the public, private, and philanthropic sectors:
  - AmeriCorps lets local communities identify their problems and the best solutions to them. It provides federal support without bureaucracy or mandates. A model of decentralized, reinvented government, most of the decisionmaking responsibility and resources are at the state and local level, with federal oversight and evaluation.
  - Hundreds of the nation's companies — from IBM to local mom-and-pop stores — invest as AmeriCorps partners to stretch federal dollars and to provide expertise and oversight.
  - Most AmeriCorps Members serve with local and national charitable groups — who compete fiercely for the help. All programs are subject to continuous oversight and evaluation to eliminate programs that do not meet tough goals and replicate those that do.
- By bringing people of various backgrounds together at the local level to solve local problems, AmeriCorps strengthens communities.
- The Corporation for National Service, created with strong bipartisan support in 1993, is a public-private partnership that administers AmeriCorps, the National Senior Service Corps, and Learn and Serve America.



### Photographs

An interesting photograph—an action shot or portrait of a person quoted — can enhance coverage. Use black-and-white glossies (at least 5" x 7") for newspapers and color slides for television. Include a "cutline" (a short, typed caption). It should identify the main figures and briefly describe the activity.

Keep the following pointers in mind when writing any communication to the media:

- When possible, do not write more than two pages.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Make sure facts are accurate, and proofread carefully.
- Avoid jargon and technical terms, or explain them if they must be used.
- Try to include quotes, examples, and anecdotes.

### Writing a Press Release

**THE INVERTED PYRAMID.** A release should follow an "inverted pyramid" format, with information appearing in the order of its importance. The inverted pyramid allows editors to easily cut the story to fit available space without losing important facts.

The top of the pyramid — the first paragraph — is the lead. It is usually one sentence long, never more than three, and generally answers the "five W's" and "H"—who, what, when, where, why and how. The lead must be written so as to grab reporters'/editors' attention immediately. They don't have time to wade through the entire release to find out what it's about.

The second paragraph is called the "bridge." The bridge provides a transition from the lead to the more detailed information to follow. It may explain any "whys" or "hows" not included in the lead. It can also be used to give the source of information in the lead or bring out additional information that complements the lead.

The third and last part of the pyramid is the "body." The information given in the lead should be explained in the body. It should include interesting and significant details that pertain to the story. Quotes from your spokesperson can be included in the body. Remember, the facts in the body — as in the entire release — are presented in diminishing order of importance.

**FORMAT.** Formatting a press release clearly will make it more likely that it will be read — and used. Type the release double-spaced on one side of 8-1/2"x11" plain white paper or your letterhead, with wide margins. The following information should be included at the top of the page:

- the name and telephone numbers (home and office) of the contact person in your organization whom reporters can call for more information
- the date and time for the story's release (e.g., For Release at 9:00 a.m., April 2, 1995 or For Immediate Release)
- a short headline that describes the content
- a "dateline" to begin the first paragraph indicating where and when the story was released (Sacramento, May 15, 1994)

When there is more than one page, type "-more-" at the bottom of each page (except the last page).

"Slug" each additional page with a page number and identifying line (Volunteer Awards, Page 2). End the release with the marks "###," "-30-", or "- END -."



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 1, 19XX

CONTACT:

Joe Smith  
212/555-1212 or

Jane Smith  
212/222-3333

## AMERICORPS MEMBERS INCREASE STARKVILLE LITERACY RATE

Starkville, MS — AmeriCorps Members working in Starkville to tutor adults and children have improved the literacy rate by 5 percent since the program began in September, program director Debbie Walker announced today.

Fifteen AmeriCorps Members have been working with local churches to provide after-school tutoring lessons with the Starkville Literacy Program, a statewide effort to combat illiteracy.

“The AmeriCorps Members have been instrumental in helping to lower our illiteracy rate,” Ms. Walker said. “Their total dedication and hard work has meant so much to the people they are helping.”

Jill Lawson, 23, an AmeriCorps Member who came to Starkville from New York to work on the project, said, “Teaching others to read and improve their writing skills makes me feel I’m really making a difference. We get up every day and know we are helping people improve their lives.”

AmeriCorps is the national service program that engages thousands of dedicated Americans in meeting the critical needs of communities in the areas of public safety, education, human needs, and the environment. In exchange for one or two years of service, AmeriCorps Members receive educational awards to help finance their college education or pay back student loans. The Starkville Literacy Program is one of approximately 400 AmeriCorps programs across the country.

-end-

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*The last paragraph, providing general information about AmeriCorps, should be used in all AmeriCorps press releases.*

CONTACT:  
Joe Smith  
212/555-1212 or

Jane Smith  
212/222-3333

## GOVERNOR TO VISIT AMERICORPS SITE

**When:** Friday, January 12, at 11:00 a.m.  
**Where:** Starkville Literacy Program, at Emerson Elementary School, 235 Main Street  
**Who:** Mississippi Governor John Doe; 15 AmeriCorps Members; Starkville Mayor Don Jones; literacy program director Debbie Walker

Governor Doe will visit the AmeriCorps\*Starkville Literacy Program to congratulate the participants on their highly successful effort to teach adults and children to read and write. Since the program's inception in September, it has improved the city's literacy rate by 5 percent.

The Governor and Mayor Jones will present a citation to program director Debbie Walker, commending the accomplishments of this community effort.

The press is invited to cover the event.

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-end-

**Starkville Literacy Program**

723 Scenic Drive  
Starkville, MS 38759

**Start Using: Upon Receipt**

**Stop Using: January 1st**

**CONTACT:**

Debbie Walker  
Program Director  
(601) 555-7825

-15 Seconds-

AmeriCorps means getting things done.

In Starkville that means increasing the literacy rate

by tutoring children and teaching senior citizens how to read.

If you are over the age of 18, join us.

Be an AmeriCorps Member. Call 555-5555.

AmeriCorps. Getting things done.

That's 555-5555.

**SAMPLE LETTER OF INVITATION FOR A SITE VISIT....**

The Honorable  
Name of Elected Official  
Title  
Address  
City, State, Zip

January 1, 1996

Dear (Name of Elected Official):

The 15 AmeriCorps Members working to eliminate illiteracy in Starkville, Mississippi, are getting things done. In fact, since they began serving in September, the AmeriCorps Members have taught over 100 Starkville residents computer skills and have helped over 250 area children become better readers.

We would like to offer you the opportunity to see for yourself how national service is making a difference in the lives of people living in the Mississippi Delta. We hope you will consider visiting our AmeriCorps site at Elmore Elementary School on Friday, October 12, at 4:30 pm. We would be honored to welcome you there to observe AmeriCorps Members teaching students in Elmore's after-school tutoring program and, afterward, to meet the Members and the children. We know you'll learn things about AmeriCorps from this firsthand experience that you couldn't learn in any other way.

I will call your staff next week to see if your schedule will permit your attendance and to answer any questions you or they might have. In the meantime, I can be reached at 601/555-7825 if you need further information.

Sincerely,

Debbie Walker  
Program Director  
AmeriCorps\*Starkville Literacy Program



The Corporation for National Service, created by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, engages Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service to their communities and the nation. Through its three main programs — AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and the National Senior Service Corps — the Corporation provides a broad range of opportunities for Americans to serve. The efforts supported by the Corporation address the nation's challenges in the areas of education, public safety, human needs, and the environment — with a strong emphasis on achieving direct and demonstrable results.

....CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

The Corporation for National Service is a public-private partnership, combining the best aspects of local control with national support. The Corporation's programs are partnerships with national and community-based service organizations; corporations and foundations; colleges and universities; and local schools and police districts.

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